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## CONDITIONS AND NEEDS OF COUNTRY LIFE

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There seems to be a consensus of opinion that there is something wrong with the country. Articles discussing the subject are myriad. Did the agricultural population view itself as urban writers appear to view it, it would doubtless consider itself as a fit subject for treatment at the old time "mourner's bench." That certain portions of our rural inhabitants are interested in the "improvement of rural matters" is evident from the appearance of discussions of some of those matters at various kinds of farmers' meetings. But that the agriculturalists view the situation with alarm is by no means evident. In order to help clear up the situation it may be well to attempt to determine just what is the rural problem. It may be well to show first what it is not.

### *I. Negative Aspects of the Problem*

1. It would be a mistake to suppose that the problem consists in rural deterioration or arises because of rural degeneration. There has taken place in the United States no such thing as general rural deterioration. A slight acquaintance with the history of our country will afford ample evidence that there has been general advance almost all along the line in country life. As compared with pre-national times the farm population is better housed, better clothed, better fed, better educated and informed, is more productive, produces what it does produce more easily, has better implements and agencies with which to work, and the farm women have been emancipated from much of the arduous labor which fell to their lot in the period of household industry.

Indeed one does not have to recur to so remote a period as that to find striking contrasts. Many of our aged contemporaries who were reared on the farm well remember the backward conditions which obtained in matters of production, marketing, transportation, obtaining necessities of life in the home, methods of living, and education. Respect for truth impels us to recognize a great advance in the general conditions of life of country popu-

lations. It is well to remember that the "rural problem" is the product of intelligence, directed towards a province which has hitherto been somewhat remote from comparison and criticism. We have evolved certain ideals of life with the growth of cities and civilization, have brought them to bear on country life with the result that the latter has been found backward in some respects as measured by those ideals. The few instances of rural arrested development or of deterioration are a minimum in total country life as compared with the extensive slums of the cities.

2. It is also a mistake to assume, as is so frequently done, that the problem lies in the direction of rural depopulation. It is commonly taken for granted that the vast growth of urban centers has taken place at the almost entire expense of rural districts. There is a movement to the cities of rural populations. It may have its serious aspects. But it is not the problem preeminently. An analysis of the census reports and those of the Commissioner General of Immigration gives these results. City growth ensues from four factors, namely, incorporation, natural increase, migration from the country, and immigration. The first is inconsequential. Natural increase accounts for about 20 per cent of city increase, immigration, for from 65 to 70 per cent, and rural migration for the remainder, say from 10 to 15 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the seeming loss of population to the cities arises as a result of movement of farmers away from their old locations to newer agricultural regions. Practically all of the older states have been heavy losers from this condition. Iowa lost population during the last decade because the value of land was high and farmers sold to others and purchased lands in the Dakotas and Canada, helping to raise the land values in those regions enormously.<sup>2</sup>

Nor must it be expected that the movement to cities which actually takes place is likely to be prevented in great measure. The forces at work in developing civilization and which must be considered basic and inevitable are largely accountable for the movement. The matter may be simply stated. One farmer produces sustenance for the support of many besides himself. Double his productive capacity and his produce supports double the original number. Carry this principle into operation generally and it will be seen that non-agricultural communities must be depended on to

<sup>1</sup> *American Journal of Sociology*, XVI, 648-661.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 651-54.

absorb the released populations. Hence cities must continue to make large advances in population as compared with the country.

3. Nor is the rural problem one of improving production chiefly, for the nation as a whole, although there are sections such as much of the South where improved agriculture must take place before other essential things may be added unto them. The motive of this statement is not one of minimizing the importance of inducing a more scientific and productive agriculture. The economic aspects of farming are exceedingly important. Increased production should mean an increased profit and this in turn should mean higher standards of living, better education of children, and improvement in the methods of living. Farmers no doubt get too little out of their soil. Much greater results might be secured also by placing agriculture on a business basis, by regarding it as a capitalistic enterprise and measuring its business success by the extent of profits. Organization of the various factors entering into the business so as to secure the combination which would yield the largest returns, and keeping a record of all phases of the business so as to have exact knowledge of cause and effect should prove advantageous. A more equitable marketing system by means of which the agricultural producers secure a larger share of the consumer's price than they do at present is desirable and constitutes a very considerable problem in itself.

While some portions of the nation are backward economically in agriculture it is not true as a whole even as compared with many other businesses. Our farmers are as progressive in their business as a class as are the mass of retail merchants, or as the mass of small factory men. Further there is nothing critical in the present method of agricultural production. We are faced by no famine. Our exportations of farm produce are still large and promise to continue so for some time to come. Farmers are not going into bankruptcy because of poor methods. They are prosperous as a class. Admit, as we must, that it would be far better if methods which did not pauperize the soil were employed, yet this is not the fundamental difficulty in farm life.

## *II. Positive Aspects of the Problem*

1. The very center and essence of the rural problem is the necessity of securing the establishment of a new point of view, a wider

and more vital outlook on the part of the residents of the rural regions. At first consideration this may seem rather a bizarre statement of the problem, one that is remote from the pressing needs of those regions. But granting for a moment that the statement is valid let us recall in what the value of a point of view consists.

The fact of dynamogenesis emphasizes the truth that every idea seeks to realize itself in action, to get itself carried out by means of the physical organism. There is a tremendously significant relation between ideas and activities. Ideas, in the evolutionary sense, are not for playing mental checkers with but to direct activities and conduct. Philosophers may speculate about them or with them, but for the mass of mankind they are entertained in order to be put into execution. And the more powerful the ideas are the more true this is, that is the more immediate is the execution. The ideas which are bathed in a glow of feeling are the most executive. They carry themselves out most speedily.

Ideals of life and of action are among the more dynamic forms of ideas. They are the ones which appeal to men as the most desirable to actualize, are most longed for, have the largest element of feeling. But an ideal is only a point of view. An ideal as to a certain line of action expresses the individual's viewpoint relative to that section of human activities. My ideal for the farmer is expressed in the statement of my point of view for the farmer.

When talking of viewpoints we are speaking of the most fundamental factor in a given situation. A wholesome viewpoint makes a wholesome life. A changed viewpoint changes the life. Obtain the power to shape the point of view of the succeeding generation and you can lead it where you will. Hence, whatever is backward in country life is due to its outlook, and we can not hope for very great improvement until the outlook of rural inhabitants relative to the place and significance of farm life is transformed.

2. There are two vital points on which a new outlook must be developed among agriculturalists. If this can be secured all the other problems may be associated with it as incidents of attainment.

(a) One of these points is the matter of living. A new outlook on life, its meaning, its possibilities of enjoyment and satis-

faction, and as to the means which are fit to secure those ends is intensely needed. Life to the average farmer is devoid of the larger and more attractive elements. His life is a round of eating, working, sleeping, saving, economizing, living meagerly, recognizing only the bare necessities, skimping along with inconveniences, especially in the home, which is uncalled for considering his wealth. The wealthy farmer is one of the most helpless of men in the matter of finding satisfaction. This appears whenever he moves into the city to live. He still practices the stern economies, lives in houses without modern conveniences, keeps the old rag carpets, attends no theaters, goes to no lectures unless they are free, and acts as a man in a strange world or as one with a starved soul. The enjoyment side of life is lacking. His cultural and esthetic soul is in a state of suspended animation.

Such facts as these in the lives of the multitude of rich residents of rural districts make it apparent that the fundamental problem is not one of economics but of transforming farmers so that they look at life in a different manner. The appreciative qualities of life must be built up. They need to have developed the sentiment that the fullest and most successful life is the one which obtains the greatest number of satisfied wants in passing. Under this transformation the country will build good houses, comfortable in the modern sense, having the conveniences which lighten the lives of the indoor workers, and the equipment which renders the place sanitary and healthful. It will put in machinery everywhere possible to do the hard work, to reduce labor, to eliminate chores, as well as to make production more profitable. It will beautify the grounds, improve the roads for travel purposes, and look to nature as a source of inspiration.

(b) The other vital point is to secure a social outlook. The farmer has been burdened with an individualism which has been extreme and in a measure disastrous. Under the system of education under which he has been schooled it is perfectly natural that this should be so. The social side of life has never been opened to him. That he was a part of human society, that he worked under inexorable laws of markets and politics, that a community life may be made a means of satisfaction and training were not self-evident and axiomatic propositions. In fact he had no conception of such truths nor had his immature teachers in the "little

old red schoolhouse." His universe was bounded by physical nature in the shape of sunshine, rain and frost, and in a very small measure by his family and one or two neighbors. He and nature accounted for what he obtained. There were no human interlopers, save at critical times. There was no social accountability that was very persistent and apparent.

As a consequence he never caught sight of the fact that the farmers are a great social class and have a worth and dignity as such. It has wealth of enormous proportions, approximating one-fourth of the nation's wealth; numbers of still greater proportions, practically one-half of the nation's population; characteristics and interests which are common to its members and which differentiate it from all other social classes. Its work is worthy, its position secure, its future promising. But in commanding power and influence in the direction of national affairs this really great social class is lacking and manifests its extreme weakness. Only by its vote at election times does it demonstrate its existence. It has not enough power to protect itself from the exploitation of other classes of a predatory nature. It has been victimized by the politicians, the trusts, the railways, and now mercilessly by the middlemen. What it needs is to develop a class-consciousness which is self-respecting, potent for organization purposes relative to government and marketing, and which operates to secure a greater regard for its rights and possibilities.

On another side the farmer's social outlook has been wanting. In rural communities the community, sociability, associational side of life has lain fallow. There has been a reign of social stagnation and social poverty. Without social intercourse the life of the average person would be considered empty notwithstanding the largeness of the farm, the heavy yield of produce, the quality of live stock, and the extent of the bank account. In social matters, even to a greater degree than in those of finding satisfaction in living, the country is far behind the corresponding grades of city life.

In one sense this dearth is due to a lack of intellectual stimulus and ferment. Reading has not been cultivated as a source of pleasure and a means of larger information. Social intercourse of a larger general nature is likely to be empty where an intellectual circulating medium is absent. A grasp and discussion of the more important social matters awaits the development of information.

Associations of a recreative and entertainment sort are little appreciated in the country. Men of the farms have not discovered the play life. Its possibilities have not been opened to them. Organized games for the children and recreation for the adults are among the greatest desiderata of rural communities. Opportunities for these will present themselves as soon as their appreciation is developed.

Deficiencies of social contact and co-operative stimulus are apparent. Cities abound in means and agencies to satisfy these ends. Isolation has seemed to insulate farmers from each other. It is an obstacle whose gravity must be realized although its prohibitive strength is likely to be overrated. Organizations for bringing about community co-operative activities for both economic and sociability purposes are highly desirable and necessary and are coming into existence as fast as the appreciation of their worth is discovered by the farming community.

3. There are certain fundamentals which are incident to the realization of this needed point of view. They must be obtained before the larger and better outlook can be fully and permanently rooted as a part of the working capital of rural society.

(a) Leadership of a residential and effective kind is necessary to enable the country to work out its destiny along the lines indicated above. A trained resident leadership is largely wanting in agricultural neighborhoods. Young men and women who go to higher institutions of learning seldom settle in the country. Even the students from agricultural colleges must be included in this statement. The country is being sapped of its ability of the trained sort by the towns and cities.<sup>3</sup> It has plenty of natural ability left but it is not developed into a working leadership. The country is therefore forced to look to other sources outside itself for initiative and organizing ability which is required. So long as this is the case it must suffer accordingly. Every class and community must ultimately expect to depend on its own intelligence and the sympathetic devotion of its own able managers. Even fairly intelligent communities are handicapped without them.

(b) The reorganization of rural education is a necessary step toward the realization of a changed viewpoint and a larger rural life. The country school is one of the few things that has remained

<sup>3</sup> *Quarterly Journal*, University of North Dakota, October, 1910, pp. 67-79.



practically unchanged during the last quarter of a century. While farms have grown, farming has been improved, houses and barns have become larger and better, the country church has been better housed and manned, the old schoolhouse has remained as it was, and the course of study has become little more adjusted to the needs of the times. To meet the demands of the situation some important modifications must be made in rural schools.

First, they must be depended on to furnish the resident leadership which is required. Higher institutions of learning can not do this because of the leakages noted above, and because they can not touch the life of every boy and girl directly in necessary ways. A leadership must be informed on the things which are close to farm life; matters of agriculture, marketing, organization for protective purposes as well as for constructive objects, the worth and value of sociability functions of the up-building sort, and the improvement of home life. In order to understand and appreciate those things it must have a training and culture in them during the educational period. Every one must be so informed and skilled that he or she may rise to take a leading part in the affairs of the community if the ability is present. This means that the schools of the region must contain and teach the matters which are crucial and intrinsic to farm life. Agriculture, domestic economy, rural sociology, are some of the necessary and pressing subjects which must be taught.

Second, the consolidation of schools constitutes another necessary step to realize the object denoted. The single-room schoolhouse is entirely inadequate to meet the situation. It cannot supply the grading, the able teaching force, the equipment and room for carrying on work of a vocational nature, the numbers of pupils needed to carry on organized play, the differentiated housing and facilities demanded for the sociability, recreational, entertainment, and cultural activities of the adults as organized into a social center, and other important neighborhood functions. Moreover, the consolidated school, while providing for all of the above essential needs, can extend its course of study so as to include high-school work as a further qualification of that leadership and appreciative intelligence which the country neighborhood demands. The latter would afford time for the gradual and completer, inculcation of the larger and finer ideals of life and teach the things which will make the

life of the average man and woman something more than a mere existence.

4. A closing remark may well be devoted to the proper point of view with which the rural problem is to be regarded. A very large part of the emphasis in the discussions of farm life has been laid on the necessity of improving it in order to keep the boys and girls from drifting to the cities. The assumption has been that the country needs them and that city attractions established in the country would be effective in holding them there. However effective this procedure might prove to accomplish what is urged, and its effectiveness may well be doubted, it does not appear to be the highest motive which may be furnished.

A more just view regards the improvement of farm life as a procedure which of right belongs to that great multitude of good people who will always be rural residents. They have a humanity in common with the residents of the cities. They have needs of life and work which they ought to realize if they can only obtain a vision of their possibility and worth. They are the heirs of the products which the myriads of the makers of civilization have created and conserved and should of right come into the enjoyment of them. Country populations have a right in their own stead to enjoy all that life offers, even if they do not contemplate leaving the soil for the city. The great problem is to discover a way by which their outlook on life and society may be transformed into one which appreciates the worth of realizing the greatest satisfactions and possibilities which may come to them as rural citizens of the great republic.